

## Stalking

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The National Center for Victims of Crime's Get Help Series provides basic information on a wide range of crime victim topics to increase awareness of the consequences of victimization and the options and resources available to help victims. This information is designed to complement and enhance the services of victim assistance professionals.

### Definitions

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#### What is stalking?

Stalking is a pattern of repeated, unwanted attention, harassment, and contact. It is a course of conduct that can include:

- Following or laying in wait for the victim
- Repeated unwanted, intrusive, and frightening communications from the perpetrator by phone, mail, and/or e-mail
- Damaging the victim's property
- Making direct or indirect threats to harm the victim, the victim's children, relatives, friends, or pets
- Repeatedly sending the victim unwanted gifts
- Harassment through the Internet, known as cyberstalking, online stalking, or Internet stalking
- Securing personal information about the victim by: accessing public records (land records, phone listings, driver or voter registration), using Internet search services, hiring private investigators, contacting friends, family, work, or neighbors, going through the victim's garbage, following the victim, etc.

Find out more about [cyberstalking](#).

#### How is stalking defined in law?

Legal definitions vary but many states define stalking as willful, malicious, and repeated following and harassment.

- Isolated acts may not fall under this type of law, but where there is a pattern, the behavior is generally illegal.
- In some states, for stalking laws to apply, the commission of the offense requires an explicit threat of violence against the victim, but elsewhere an implied threat is sufficient.
- Under most state laws, the victim's fearful response is built into the legal definition of stalking. This recognizes that the perpetrator's repeated, uninvited pursuit of the victim is by its nature frightening and threatening.

Find your state's laws now.

### **Is the threatening nature of stalking always apparent?**

- To an outsider, the stalker's behavior can appear friendly and unthreatening, for example, showering the victim with gifts or flattering messages. But, these acts are intrusive and frightening if they are unwelcome to the victim.
- Whatever means stalkers use, stalking induces fear and disrupts the lives of victims.

## **Facts**

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### **How Prevalent is Stalking?**

- Roughly 1 million American women and 400,000 American men in the United States are stalked annually. [1]
- More than 8 million women (8 percent) and 2 million men (2 percent) will be stalked at some point during their lives. [2]
- Stalking lasts, on average, nearly two years according to victim reports
- One study showed 25 percent of victims took time from work to deal with a stalking problem. [3]

### **Who are the victims of stalking?**

- The overwhelming majority of victims (78 percent) are women.
- Most female victims are stalked by current or former intimate partners such as spouses, cohabiting partners, or dating partners. [4]
- A minority of victims are stalked by strangers.

### **Who are the perpetrators?**

- Nearly 90 percent of stalkers are men.
- Stalkers can be strangers, acquaintances, friends, co-workers, or current or former intimate partners, including spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, and dates.
- Current or former intimate partners stalk the majority of female victims.
- A minority of stalkers target victims with whom they have no prior connection or relationship.
- Stalkers are often socially maladjusted, emotionally immature, insecure and jealous by nature. Like perpetrators of domestic violence, who often stalk their partners, they seek to exert power and control over the victim.
- The majority of stalkers are not mentally ill. A minority (usually stranger stalkers) suffer from mental health disorders (such as paranoid schizophrenia or manic depression) and exhibit delusional thought patterns or behaviors.

## **Understanding Stalking**

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### **Is stalking dangerous?**

- Stalking can lead to physical violence resulting in serious injury or even death.
- It's often difficult to predict when and how a stalker will act or whether the unwanted intrusions into the victim's life will escalate into physical or sexual assaults. [5]
- Some stalkers never move beyond threats and intimidation, while others do so with little warning.
- Victims may not know if action they take will stop the stalking or make things worse.
- Stalking is unpredictable. Victims should talk to trained victim assistance professionals about ways to improve their safety,

their options, and resources available to help them and important to report stalking behavior to law enforcement.

### How are stalking and domestic violence linked?

- Many domestic violence victims report being stalked by current or former intimate partners, particularly towards the end of the relationship.
- Perpetrators of domestic violence often engage in stalking, repeatedly harassing victims by phoning them, following them, threatening them, or sending them gifts and notes.
- Stalking is one way perpetrators of domestic violence monitor and control their victims. Their behavior often escalates as they feel their power and authority slipping away.
- Current or former partners are particularly dangerous stalkers, committing 30 percent of all homicides against women. [6]

Learn more about **domestic violence** now.

### What is the impact of stalking on victims?

Individual responses may vary but commonly include:

- **Fear:** of what the stalker will do next, of leaving the house, of the dark, of the phone ringing
- **Anxiety:** about the unknown consequences, the safety of family members or pets, what the future holds, whether the stalking will ever end, how other people will respond if they find out what's happening
- **Vulnerability:** feeling totally exposed, never feeling safe, not knowing who to trust or where to turn for help
- **Nervousness:** feeling anxious, fearful, jumpy, irritable, impatient, on edge, getting startled by small things
- **Depression:** feeling despair, hopelessness, overwhelmed with emotion, tearful, angry
- **Hypervigilance:** being continually alert to known and unknown dangers, taking elaborate safety measures against the perpetrator or any suspicious people, repeatedly re-checking locks and bolts on doors and windows
- **Stress:** having difficulty concentrating, forgetting things, feeling generally distracted and worried
- **Stress-related physical symptoms:** such as headaches and stomach aches
- **Eating problems:** not feeling hungry, forgetting to eat, eating all the time
- **Flashbacks or intrusive memories:** reliving frightening incidents, not being able to break away from disturbing thoughts, feelings, and memories
- **Sleeping problems:** nightmares, interrupted sleep patterns, not being able to fall asleep, wanting to sleep all the time
- **Isolation:** feeling disconnected from family or friends, feeling no one understands
- **Use of alcohol or drugs:** to numb fear and anxiety triggered by stalking incidents, to induce calm and sleep

### What kind of obstacles can prevent victims seeking help?

- Fears about how the stalker will respond
- Threats by the stalker
- Limited options for relocation to safer housing
- Language barriers
- Limited accessibility of victim assistance programs
- Belief that no one can or will help
- Fears about the consequences of seeking help (how others will respond)

Victims stalked by law enforcement officers are among those facing special difficulties.

- Law enforcement officers are in a powerful position to harm victims and prevent them getting assistance.
- Victims may be especially afraid because they know for certain that their stalkers have legal access to firearms and other weapons.
- Victims may know or fear their complaints will not be taken seriously because of the identity of the perpetrator.
- Victims may feel anxious or uncomfortable making a complaint to police or prosecutors, especially in small communities.
- Victims of same-sex relationship stalking (i.e., gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender victims) also face special problems, and are confronted by a different set of issues. The consequences of reporting may make these victims vulnerable in ways that don't apply to other victims.
- They may risk being "outed" to unsupportive or hostile families, friends, employers, work colleagues, and communities.
- In some jurisdictions, a complaint to police may risk criminal charges against the victim, since same-sex activities are still illegal in some places.

## The Bottom Line

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- Victims should always trust their instincts and never minimize the stalker's behavior. If you feel unsafe, assume you are unsafe, and seek assistance without delay.
- Many program providers, particularly those working with victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, are aware of the sensitive and difficult issues that may arise in stalking cases.
- Community based victim assistance providers include organizations such as crisis intervention centers, domestic violence shelters, and support groups which can provide victim services like counseling, court accompaniment, a safe place to stay, and advocacy. System based victim assistance providers are usually part of the police department or prosecutor's office and can provide many of the same services to victims who choose to bring charges against a perpetrator.
- If a community or system based victim service provider cannot offer suitable advice and assistance, they should still be able to make referrals to organizations that can help. If they are not able to do so, please call the National Center for Victims of Crime.
- Stalking victims are not to blame for the stalker's behavior. All victims are entitled to help from victim services professionals.
- Victims who feel anxious, depressed, or stressed for more than a short period of time should request referrals to suitable healthcare providers. Stalking can trigger conditions like depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which may benefit from treatment.

## Steps Victims Can Take

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The following suggestions cannot guarantee your safety but are practical steps that may reduce your risk of physical and mental harm and provide you and your family with better protection against stalking.

#### **Seek Advice from a Trained Victim Assistance Professional**

- Victim assistance providers are trained to assist and support crime victims. It's their job to advise and assist on ways to keep victims safe and stop the harassment.
- They can provide critical information about state anti-stalking laws and your options, help you devise safety plans, and refer you to local services including emergency shelters.
- If you are faced with difficult choices-like applying for a protective order, moving home, or filing a police report-they can help you think through the pros and cons.

Get assistance now.

#### **Take Simple Safety Precautions**

- Vary your daily routine as much as you can.
- Change your travel routes.
- Get rides with colleagues or friends to and from work.
- Go with other parents to take your children to school and collect them.
- Try to leave home and work at different times each day.
- Do your shopping and other chores with friends or relatives.
- Plan leisure activities that involve other people.
- Protect your personal information – shred discarded mail, be wary of unsolicited inquiries, find out how much information there is about you on the internet.

#### **Formulate a Safety Plan**

- A safety plan is an important step in keeping safe. It involves thinking through short and long-term options in advance, knowing how to access help in emergencies, and having the information about services and resources before you need it.
- Safety plans should include provision for emergency shelter (in case you have to leave home without warning) as well as temporary and permanent relocation options.
- If you know the stalker, it is vital to identify safe places to stay and ways to prevent the stalker from discovering your new location. Stalkers with access to their victims' personal information can track and intimidate them more easily.
- A critical aspect of safety planning is minimizing contact with the stalker. You should tell the stalker only once (through registered mail, e-mail, or an attorney) to stop harassing you and never communicate again under any circumstances.

Formulate a **safety plan** now.

### **Collect Evidence**

- Keep a written record of all stalking-related incidents and behavior, noting the time and place and names and addresses of any witnesses. Note how the incident made you feel. This may be important if your jurisdiction has a stalking law that requires instilling fear in a victim.
- Keep a written record of all communications (especially threats) made by the stalker or third parties by phone, e-mail, mail, or other means.
- Preserve evidence of all criminal behavior, including letters, packages, photos, video and voice mail, and other tapes. Start your own stalking log. (link to Stalking Safety Plan bulletin-page 12)
- Request copies of tapes from commercial surveillance systems as well as from personal video cameras used for security, which may contain evidence of the stalking.
- Document incidents of stalking and the stalker's behavior carefully. You need evidence of a pattern of harassment in connection with complaints to the police, criminal prosecutions, orders of protection, and civil lawsuits.

### **Make the most of criminal and civil protections in your state**

- Check all relevant laws where you live. Victim assistance providers or your local prosecutor's office should have information about state statutes. Find your state's laws here.
- Consider what other criminal offenses the stalker has committed, for example: physical or sexual assault, damage to/theft of your property, or breaking into your home. This may make it possible to prosecute the stalker even if they can't be prosecuted under a specific stalking law.
- Find out what kinds of orders of protection are available and weigh the pros and cons of each type with help from a victim assistance provider.
- Orders of protection may have a role within an overall safety strategy. They may deter perpetrators who fear the possible consequences of their violation (arrest, prosecution, fines, and incarceration) and may also help law enforcement arrest the stalker before they become violent, but there are important safety issues to consider. Be sure to make sure that you fully understand the related safety issues before pursuing an order of protection. . (link to future protective order bulletin)
- Investigate whether a civil action for damages might be an option for you.

Explore your **civil justice options** now. (link to <http://www.victimbar.org> )

### **Work with law enforcement**

- Stalking is a serious crime. It can inflict severe emotional damage and may lead to physical and sexual violence.
- Report all stalking incidents to the police. Reports may lead to an arrest or an informal intervention (such as a warning) that sometimes helps stop the harassment. [7]
- If you are reluctant to file a complaint because you've been intimidated or don't believe law enforcement can or will assist you, talk to a trained victim assistance professional. [8]
- If you complain to the police and are dissatisfied with their response, call the National Center for Victims of Crime. We can help you identify who can assist you: local victim assistance providers, your local prosecutor's office, district, state, or commonwealth's attorney or state solicitor.

### **How to help a friend or relative**

- Always encourage your relative/friend to seek professional advice as indicated above.
- Remember that the victim is not responsible for the stalker's behavior. Be sympathetic and understanding and do not blame the victim for the stalker's actions.
- Get information about local anti-stalking laws and resources.
- Educate yourself about stalkers and stalking behavior.
- Offer practical and emotional support.
- Think of ways you can personally help keep your relative/friend safe.
- If you don't know how to help, contact a local victim assistance provider.

## **Resources**

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### **Related "Get Help" Series Publications**

- Stalking Safety Planning
- Cyberstalking
- Orders of Protection
- Stalking and the Law
- Domestic Violence Safety Planning Guidelines
- Domestic Violence

## Helpful Organizations

Family Violence Prevention Fund  
 383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304  
 San Francisco, CA 94103-5133  
 415-252-8900  
[www.fvpf.org](http://www.fvpf.org)

National Center for Victims of Crime  
 2000 M Street, NW Suite 480  
 Washington, DC 20036  
[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
 P.O. Box 18749  
 Denver, CO 80218  
 303-839-1852  
[www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

National Crime Victim Bar Association  
 2000 M Street, NW, Suite 480  
 Washington, DC 20038  
 202-467-8700  
[www.victimbar.org](http://www.victimbar.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
 800-799-SAFE  
 800-787-3224 (TTY)  
[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)

Privacy Rights Clearinghouse  
 1717 Kettner Ave., Suite 105  
 San Diego, CA 92101  
 619-298-3396  
[www.privacyrights.org](http://www.privacyrights.org)

RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network)  
 635-B Pennsylvania Ave., SE  
 Washington, DC 20003  
 800-656-HOPE  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

## References

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1. National Institute of Justice. (1997, November) The Crime of Stalking: How Big is the Problem? *Bulletin*, citing The National Violence Against Women Survey.
2. *Stalking and Domestic Violence* (1998), *supra*. National Institute of Justice/Centers For Disease Control and Prevention report, *Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence* (NIJ/CDC research report, July 2000)
3. *Stalking: Lessons from Recent Research*, Address by Jeremy Travis, Director, National Institute of Justice, to National Center for Women and Policing Conference, Orlando, FL, April 14, 1999.
4. The term intimate partner is generally defined to include current or former spouses, co-habitants of the same or opposite sex, and current or former boyfriends or girlfriends.
5. It has been estimated that stalkers are violent between 25percent and 35percent of the time. The group most likely to be violent is made up of stalkers who are current or former intimates. See *Stalking and Domestic Violence* (1998)

supra, page 2.

6. *Federal Bureau of Investigation , Uniform Crime Report, 1998.*
7. Evidence suggests both that victims are more likely to be satisfied with the way their cases are handled if perpetrators are arrested and that some believe informal warnings are more effective than arrests in halting the stalking. See *Stalking and Domestic Violence*, supra, pages 16 and 21.
8. Ibid.

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